



A Hot and Deadly M

Story and Photos by Arthur McQueen

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INTENSE heat enveloped U.S. soldiers at the Ikeja Cantonment Area in Lagos, Nigeria, western Africa's largest city, 300 miles from the equator,

Adding to their discomfort, the soldiers — from the Mannheim, Germany-based 720th Ordnance Company — were wearing flak jackets and were laden with an assortment of tools and tape.

Months earlier, the Nigerian

army's 9th Mechanized Brigade's ammunition-transfer point at Ikeja had exploded. The blast killed some 1,000 people and created a death zone littered with more than 100,000 munitions.

The Nigerian government sent out a call for assistance. U.S. Army, Europe, responded by organizing Operation Avid Recovery to begin saving lives, one square meter at a time. Four days after the incident, U.S. advance teams were on the ground.

"The local population was already

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» (Far left) Soldiers of the 720th Ordnance Company prepare recovered munitions for destruction.

» (Left) The 720th's SSG Bryan Powell inspects one of the many kinds of munitions the USAREUR soldiers recovered after the blast at the Ikeja ammunition-transfer point.

» (Below) These munitions — a small example of the types of devices laying around the cantonment area — have been marked as safe and are awaiting disposal.

» (Bottom) The initial explosion at Ikeja devastated the Nigerian army cantonment area and killed more than 1,000 people.



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at risk when the U.S. soldiers arrived,” said 720th Ord. Co. commander CPT Brian Winningham, whose unit formed the core of Task Force Avid Recovery.

“After the transfer point exploded, all of the ordnance at the site was susceptible to various types of spin, inertia, heat, shock and friction. Just going near it was dangerous,” Winningham said.

The vista of twisted metal on the ground was awe-inspiring, he said. Shells of all sizes and shapes cluttered the ground out to a half-kilometer from

the blast site. Many of them had been ripped open in the explosion and were rusting in the wet heat.

Telephone poles were bent, and power lines sagged. Severed lines lay on the ground. Concrete barracks and apartments were abandoned, their roofs peeled open like tin cans. The dark, empty buildings contributed to the overall eeriness of the scene.

“When we came down here and saw what had happened, we knew we had our work cut out for us,” said 1SG David Lee, as he held a detonator and





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inspected it for explosive residue.

"The first thing we did was advise the Nigerian government to evacuate the area," said SFC Charles Lee. Many Ikeja residents had moved back in, heedless of the danger. Goats, lizards and chickens still wandered freely through the compound, searching for food.

"There were children within the cantonment area running and playing around unexploded ordnance," said MAJ Allen Cassell of the 21st Theater Support Command, the task force commander. "One small Belgian rifle grenade, or the fuse for a mortar that would fit in a child's hand, is just as deadly as some of the 120mm white-phosphorous rounds lying around.

"The initial assessment team laid out the area into six large grids around the original ammunition-transfer depot," Cassell said. The teams then went into each grid and did an assessment. It changed daily as they found additional unexploded ordnance. With the "roadmap" as a guide, they cleared the visible munitions from lanes within the grid.

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"Operationally, the first thing we did was establish a safe holding area, out of the sun," said 1SG Lee. "We swept the range and detonated, in-place, everything that we considered too dangerous to transport.

"Then we brought the Nigerians on line to help rid the area of 'pick-up-and-carry-away' munitions," he added. "We eliminated those weekly in a mass detonation at a site 60 kilometers from here, away from any residential areas."

"Our number-one difficulty here is the heat," said SFC Lee. "We usually start operations at 0600, and are forced to stop at 1200. At 1100, the temperature is 94 to 96 degrees, and that's when things start blowing up on their own."

At 100 degrees, white phosphorus starts to flow, then smoke and then the round can initiate, added 1SG Lee. "Out here, the standard Army C-4 demolition charge is like soft putty, fun to work with, but dangerous. You constantly have to make sure the ordnance is in the shade."

The heat and humidity also affect

» (Top left) The American EOD soldiers had to recover, measure, identify and catalog more than 600 types of ordnance found at the Ikeja site.

» (Above) A huge smoke cloud rises above the site where 720th Ord. Co. soldiers used some 250 pounds of C-4 to destroy recovered munitions.

» (Above, right) Many grim reminders remain of the destruction caused by the accident at the Nigerian army ammunition transfer point. That explosion created a "death zone" littered with munitions.

the equipment. Explosive ordnance disposal soldiers use portable X-ray machines to assess the stability of munitions. Binoculars and digital cameras, for documenting various types of rounds, are all affected by condensation, 1SG Lee added.

The soldiers didn't dress for comfort. Each wore a helmet, flak vest, boots, long pants and protective eyewear. Their battle-dress uniform pants and jackets were typically dark, drenched with sweat. They drank water whenever possible.

"The first day, I went through five bottles of water," said SGT Mike Tarvin. The humidity hovered around



95 percent as he measured and cataloged munitions. “But this is fantastic. I get to do my job.”

EOD technicians do the same job in peacetime as in war. They train constantly, and are always focused on safety.

“The school we go to is nine to 12 months long, and they don’t teach people how to die,” said SFC Lee. Normal training situations teach students everything from how to dispose of single devices to how to handle large quantities of ordnance.

“Sometimes training seems far-fetched. Let’s say a Russian ammunition supply plane crashes directly into a French ammo dump,” said SPC John Worcester, as he placed a sandbag around an item to be blown up in place. “Then you come down here, and it’s a reality. Normally we train with hundreds of rounds. Here there are tens of thousands.”

SSG Jason Doty noted that accidents of this nature are fortunately rare. “This is the first time an ammunition storage point has blown up with so many different types of ordnance in

it,” he said. During the Vietnam War, an American ammunition supply point exploded with equivalent destructive power, but it contained fewer varieties of munitions.

The Nigerians provided the task force with a list of ordnance kept in the transfer depot. According to SSG Dan James, the 720th has identified 604 different types of munitions from around the world at the site. A short list of their originating countries includes the United States, France, Germany, Russia, China, the former

Yugoslavia, Belgium, Sweden, Italy, Chile and Great Britain. And some of the munitions dated to World War II.

Despite the daunting task of eliminating the danger the ordnance poses, Worcester remained positive. “It’s the best job in the Army. Who else gets to do what we do? It involves a lot of responsibility, but offers a great reward, knowing we’ve saved people’s lives.”

Following their initial clean up of the site, the task force trained Nigerian army soldiers to identify, clean and categorize the munitions, said SFC Lee.

“Nigerian soldiers trained in bomb disposal tried to manage the situation before U.S. soldiers arrived. But now they know how to better dispose of the ordnance safely,” said Brig. Gen. George Emdin, commander of the Nigerian 9th Mech. Bde.

The USAREUR operation has successfully reduced the immediate threat to the residents of Lagos, but others will need to continue the mission. “It’s going to take a very long time to clean this up,” 1SG Lee said. □

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